

DISSEMINATED BY MERCURY PUBLIC AFFAIRS, A REGISTERED FOREIGN AGENT, ON BEHALF OF THE EMBASSY OF TURKEY. MORE INFORMATION IS ON FILE WITH THE DEPT. OF JUSTICE, WASHINGTON, DC.

### **Turkey's Virus Response**

The Turkish government provides free universal healthcare, and made early investments in its healthcare infrastructure that are paying off now. Our efforts are turning the tide: the daily growth of new cases recently [dropped](#) to the slowest pace since the first case was confirmed in early March, and daily hospital discharges are now far exceeding new cases.

But some critics continue to pound President Erdogan for his “mishandling” of the crisis. So, let's review the facts.

The reforms and investments we have made make healthcare more accessible to more people. Turkey has invested in its health workforce and built new hospitals, with plans underway predating COVID-19 for [ten](#) new hospitals across Turkey's densest urban centers. As a result, we have not experienced the same kind of overwhelming pressure on our health system that has hobbled other countries.

We also rank among the [top five](#) nations in the world in our rate of testing. We recognize that means our infection numbers will be high for a period of time — because there is a direct correlation between more testing and more positive cases, that's no big secret — but there's also no responsible way to get this under control without mass testing.

To cushion the blow to businesses and households, the government has postponed debt payments and reduced taxes, and is providing 36-month fixed interest rate loans with deferred payment to all businesses. It is also providing direct financial assistance to families in need. After announcing a 100 billion liras (\$14.7 billion) support package for businesses, we are also [planning](#) to make it easier for the sovereign wealth fund to take over private companies in distress. The critics conveniently ignore those facts.

We also provide free universal healthcare to our people – which the critics often ignore. This is crucial if we want to successfully fight back against the virus, and many experts [agree](#): countries without it are at a severe disadvantage.

In fact, we are one of the few countries in our region to offer universal healthcare after spending significant time reforming the system beginning in 2003. As the New England Journal of Medicine [noted](#), we embarked on an “ambitious health system reform to overcome major inequities in health outcomes and to protect all citizens against financial risk. Within 10 years, it had achieved universal health coverage and notable improvements in outcomes and quality.”

We also are taking social distancing measures seriously. We halted all international flights, restricted domestic travel, closed schools, bars and cafes, and suspended mass prayers. We have also begun imposing weekend lockdowns in larger cities to curb the outbreak.

We were one of the first countries to limit and eventually ban travel with nations impacted by the virus. We started screening passengers immediately for symptoms right at the airports before halting all travel later on.

We did not discriminate against people based on their country of origin while protecting them from the disease. We brought back many Syrian refugees that were waiting at the border with Greece in order to prevent an outbreak among them. We took precautions in the refugee camps and among the IDPs in northern Syria.

Despite fighting the coronavirus with strained resources, we also recognize that it should be a collective effort and no country should be left alone in this fight. Turkey has sent medical supplies to many countries including Italy, Spain, Iran, Kosovo, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia among many others.

We paid special attention to our at-risk elderly citizens. We implemented restrictions on the movement of our citizens aged 65 and older for their own safety by making sure all their needs were met by local authorities. We did not forget about our old and the young.

We went even further by attending even to the needs of our street animals. All this was guided by our President Erdogan's clear instructions and continuous emphasis on a human-centric and humane approach in meeting this challenge.

Examining Turkey's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is important, and Turkey's ability to manage this in the right way matters. Turkey is the crossing point between Europe and Asia, it borders Iran – where dire concerns over the virus remain, and Istanbul is home to one of the world's largest, most trafficked airports.

All governments ought to be ready for scrutiny now and over many years to come over their handling of the crisis. It is important to start thinking about what went wrong and what can be done to prevent such an outbreak in the future.

*Fahrettin Altun is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's communications director.*